

# SELF-DETERMINATION THE FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORY OF PERSON IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF KAROL WOJTYŁA

TADEUSZ ROSTWOROWSKI, S.J.\*

**Abstract:** The concept of self-determination is the central category of person in the understanding of Karol Wojtyła. He perceived and developed it thanks to the application of a phenomenological method so that in the full description of experience gained by man one arrives at the noumenal bases of man himself.

**Keywords:** experience, act, self-determination, truth.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of *self-determination* itself is one rarely used in philosophy, particularly in relation to anthropology. It does appear, however, in the field of the political sciences, and in particular in psychology. It is in this very context that one may find references that talk of the *self-determination* of the nations of the European Union. Raising the question as to whether, following the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, the states joined by such a political system have not lost or given up a part of this effectuality of self-determination for themselves, or whether this is not the case.

It follows to state, however, that this concept of so-called *self-determination* functioned much earlier and continues to fully function within psychology (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). It is our intention to present the philosophical conception of *self-determination*<sup>1</sup> in the thought of K. Wojtyła. For him this is a key concept within personalistic anthropology (Wojtyła, 1974, 1978) one which he was to construct for many years.

---

\* Tadeusz Rostworowski is Ph.D., Jesuit University of Philosophy and Education Ignatianum, Kraków, Poland. E-mail: [rostworowski.t@gmail.com](mailto:rostworowski.t@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> In *Powszechnej Encyklopedii Filozofii* Lublin (1995) there is no entry for *self-determination*. This is a characteristic state of affairs for the concept does not fit within the Thomist philosophical categories represented by the Lublin School. Similarly, Father T. Ślipko, as an extremely good Thomist ethicist, never involved himself in this concept.

In his main philosophical work *The Acting Person*<sup>2</sup>, which arose during the course of debate during the Second Vatican Council, he developed an entire theory of this concept. To which he was to return often in later years and upon which he based the views he expressed already as Pope John Paul II<sup>3</sup>. This is at the same time his very original contribution to the development of personalistic anthropology<sup>4</sup>. In this article the method applied will be that designated by the author himself, only after which will there be room for the second stage i.e. the assembly and presentation of the general theory of *self-determination*.

In the work *The Acting Person* the way of presenting and conducting analysis is linked with the phenomenological method. This means that all analyses are based on man's experience. This experience becomes the starting point and area of analyses conducted<sup>5</sup>. The basic question which initially appears is the following: *is the describing and interpreting of that which man has experienced something upon the basis of which one may come to the noumenal bases of man as an individual?*

## THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE

How does K. Wojtyła understand experience and what phenomenological method does he apply as description and interpretation?

So what is experience? First it follows to say after K. Wojtyła, that it is a great cognitive process. Within it man is the object and subject at the same time, the subject of his own cognition. This is based on empiric moments. In each of these man resides, for it is

---

<sup>2</sup> The most important of K. Wojtyła's philosophical works, *Osoba i czyn* has already many editions (Wojtyła, 1969, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Characteristic is that more often than not John Paul II referred to the concept of self-determination within the central catechesis, when he presented his theology of the body. John Paul II (1979 – 1983).

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/catechesis\\_genesis/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19800213\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/catechesis_genesis/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19800213_en.html) – 01.12.2010.

<sup>4</sup> It would be worth comparing the concept of self-determination with what L. Boros (1962), and after Boros (1974) writes about death being the fullest decision of man.

<sup>5</sup> According to Wojtyła 'It follows to commence from the experience: of that *which* is; of that *which is*; of that *as* is, and of that *as* it appears without any conditions *a priori* imposed either on the thing experienced or the experience solicited for it' (Styczeń, 1980, p.269).

precisely the *I am me alone* that is contained in every experience. Experience is at the same time tied to understanding. It has its moments and its continuity. Therefore, here the matter concerns experience as a great cognitive process for man, this being linked with understanding. According to K. Wojtyła what should be understood? Understood was to be: ‘intellectually to grasp the essence of a thing or the connections between things’<sup>6</sup>.

It is with exactly that understanding of the process based on experience and its understanding that links the phenomenological method that the author uses. It follows to here make it clear at the very start that K. Wojtyła was not a phenomenologist, one who would have based his whole way of thinking and analysis of experience on phenomenology as a philosophical system. He fully uses the phenomenological method as an instrument in his work and research. Which is why he wrote: ‘I understand through this reduction (phenomenological reduction) an operation conducted to the fullest and at the same time the most significant visualisation of a given content’ (Ibidem, 100). Therefore equally a phenomenological method thus understood allows one to grasp and fundamentally capture the facts given within the experience. And hence he writes about the said in another place: ‘A great service may be given in this case by the phenomenological method as well as the ability connected with it to exactly exploit the experienced data’ (Ibidem, 167).

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF ACT

In the description of this experience the matter concerns chiefly *act*. ‘There is no proper expression in English for this notion; it will be instructive to see how the same notion can be expressed in other languages. We may take, for example, the Polish word <czyn>, and the German <die Tat>. They do not identify fully with the French <acte humain>, or the Italian <atto umano>, whose terms are literal translations of the Latin <actus humanus>, but not necessarily inclusive of the latter term *when it relates metaphysical depth of the latter term when it relates to the objectivization of the dynamism proper to man as person*. The Polish term <czyn> seems to be equivalent in content to <actus humanus> just like the German <die

---

<sup>6</sup> K. Wojtyła (1985). *Osoba i czyn* (the second Polish edition amended and supplemented). Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne, p. 46.

(menschliche) Tat>, although in a different language *from more phenomenological*. The shade of meaning on the term <czyn> is expressed in Polish through a distinct verb <działać> (the Latin equivalent being <agere>), also the noun <działanie> which expressed different kinds of activity, for which reason one speaks for instance of the activity of animals, whereas <czyn> indicates all that St. Thomas expresses in his <actus humanus> as well as in his analyses of <volontarium><sup>7</sup>. For an act given in experience constitutes to some extent a window through which the author desires to peer into the depth of the individual.<sup>8</sup> In Polish as equally in German the word act represents an activity appropriate only for man as an individual. In the spirit of these languages one may say that only the activities of man may be termed an act. And since this is the activity of a person then it always possesses a moral dimension. That is to say that the activity of an individual is always good or bad, and therefore it is never morally indifferent; it is never devoid of these values.

We commonly say in colloquial language *to fulfil an act*. What does this common saying of ours, one functioning in colloquial language, mean? Within it an act becomes connected with the dimension of fullness; with fullness in the dynamic dimension, where fulfilment is an approach towards it but is equally not fulfilment. Man through his acts arrives at this fullness, though also refutes it, leading to unfulfilment. Which is some kind of existential destruction, negation. And here there arises the question: when does an act of man lead to fulfilment, speaking in language *man fulfils an act* and when does that not happen? One may most generally say that in the case of Karol Wojtyła *man fulfils an act*<sup>9</sup>, i.e. reaches fulfilment when the act

---

<sup>7</sup> K. Wojtyła (1976). *Act and Experience*, in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Analecta Husseriana*, V. Dordrecht: D.Reidel, p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> 'How to see one's very self? How to manifest oneself? Is it like a mirror in which one can see, view, some window where 'my world', my 'I' will be drawn back for me? Inact it is such a mirror, such a window – Wojtyła answers. This window is act, mine for you, yours for yourself. Yet in order to see in it one needs to gain as if an ability to read this mirror, to look through this window. Only then will it manifest itself to me myself, to you yourself, to we ourselves, to people, persons... Through a limited ability to read one will see at most only some coloured picture on the glass. With a good ability the window becomes increasingly transparent for the reader. One does not notice the window slowly, one sees in it straight ahead – although not without it – a person's world'. Styczeń, T. (1980), p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> "Il fatto fondamentale *...io agisco – l'uomo agisce*, ci permette di afferrare e comprendere, e anche di intuire in modo evidente, la trascendenza dell'uomo (della

within his structure appears as *self-determination*. If this is not the case then it leads to unfulfilment or the destruction of fulfillment.

#### SELF-DETERMINATION APPEARING IN THE FACT OF THE EXPERIENCE *I WANT*

What is *self-determination*?

In analysing the experience of man's activities one may state that I experience my own activity in particular in two basic dimensions:

1. The first is the active: *I act, I am the cause of my action*, its performer;
2. And secondly I experience that *something is merely happening within me*, over which I have no influence.

Within me myself there are played out many dynamic processes, over which I have no influence, which within me merely take place, they take place beyond the threshold of my consciousness. However I am aware of these processes when I direct somehow the magnifying glass of my consciousness on them. This occurs also when they stop to correctly function and when there appears, for example, pain or some absence or disturbance within these regularities.

Whereby for what I am the instigator I am at the same time responsible for. Which means that I am responsible since I committed it. However the degree of this responsibility is dependant and connected with the personal maturity of the act. As equally the total consciousness of its commitment. Yet for that which is merely happening within me, dynamism in the dimension of activation, I bear no responsibility for it whatsoever. I am not answerable for all processes when they are beyond the threshold of my consciousness.

Here there appears a new dimension which is the moment of will. This *I want*. I fulfil that which it, will, indicates for me. As equally the determination which I myself have achieved as the undertaking of a concrete act, derives itself from will. Ultimately will

---

persona) nell'azione. Sembra che l'interpretazione tradizionale dell'agire umano, dell'atto (*actus humanus*) non ne manifestasse la trascendenza nel suo significato proprio. *L'interpretazione tradizionale dell'actus humanus*, cioè dell'atto della volontà, interpretato – certo in modo eccellente – come atto fondamentale e fonte del rivolgersi dell'uomo verso il fine". K.Wojtyła (2003), *Metafisica della persona (tutte le opere e saggi integrativi)*, a cura di Giovanni Reale e Tadeusz Styczeń, Milano: Bompiani, 2nd ed., pp.1409–1410.

indicates the dimension of freedom. Without it everything would become simply an activation, that is merely what happens in me, over which I have no influence whatsoever. While the designation *I want*, I can – I don't have to, but I want, I am not forced, this is not happening merely within me, this I want to occur, for that is my will which expresses my freedom.

#### TRANSCENDENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Freedom and man's will point at the same time to the dimension of his transcendence. Why? I transcend myself (trans – scendere) striving for some aims – goods which are beyond me, but which are also within me myself.

In philosophical language the meaning of the word *transcendence* is bound with the crossing of the border of one dimension into another. The very word trans-scendere, as breaching/crossing, to go beyond is *already spoken of*. It is this transcending of one dimension into another that K. Wojtyła calls horizontal transcendence. He goes even further in his analyses speaking and writing equally about vertical transcendence. What does this mean? It plays itself out internally, of the person himself as an individual. It, in transcending its very self, strengthens itself at the same time. For it is the fruit of self-determination as an expression of objectivation within the orbit of the sphere of *I*, i.e. of pure subjectivity. This objectivation derives from the fact that self-determination has a cognitive character striving towards a truth about oneself and in oneself. "We are using in the present exposition the phrase *with reference to truth*, possibly *assigned to truth*. These expressions convey reality, and this is the idea, for we discover within the internal dynamic a relation to truth which is something else than the relation to the things of desire, something deeper than this. The relation to truth is not exhausted within the structure of wanting as intentional act, it does constitute, however, the enrooting of this very act in the individual. Every act of wanting, as it is a settlement or selection displays its dependence on the person. One may refer to this dependence as dependence in truth (Wojtyła 1985, 170).

*In fulfilling an act*, in other words approaching fulfilment, being a person who acts, it is exactly through this acting that one becomes at the same time more human, for through acting one reaches fulfilment, one becomes fulfilled in one's action and through it as a

person himself. Therefore to be a man – an individual, one becomes at the same time this by achieving its fulfilment specifically through action.

But in order for me to understand *myself* what is expressed by the term *self-determination* I first must possess myself and control myself. Therefore the first task of *self-determination* concerns me myself, in the dimension of vertical transcendence. ‘The simple experience *I want* cannot be correctly interpreted within the dynamic entirety of man if we do not take into consideration within it the said specific complexity peculiar to the person that is brought about by self-possession. Only upon such a grounding is self-determination possible, while every true human *I want* is this very self-determination. It is this not as the content of an experience plucked from the dynamic structure of the person, but as the content deeply rooted in this very entirety (Ibidem, 132).

And then may I only, that is to say when I contemplate my very self, within the dimension of *self-determination*, present my very self as a gift to another, as equally can I accept another as a gift; at times a difficult and demanding present!

#### THE THEORY OF *SELF-DETERMINATION*

*Self-determination* points to the internal structure of an individual, which hides and at the same time appears in that very dimension of experience that is the fact: *I want*. This talks of the determination directed towards one’s own interior, it is based on *self-possession and self-control*. In reality this is the case, for man in order to decide about something must earlier possess it. Within this process of *self-possession* nobody is able to replace anyone. I may merely decide what it is I possess in reality. Therefore equally in order to decide about one’s very self, one needs to first possess the said. Hence it results that we talk of self-possession. For I must control that which I possess in myself. Events experienced reveal this fact in a dual form: *he who controls* – the aspect more dominating; *what is controlled* – the aspect more objective. However here the matter concerns the objectivation which is played out internally of the subject, therefore it is equally closely connected with the subjective dimension i.e. with the dimension *I* which rules. This is bound to consciousness within the dimension of experience. Within this internal structure of man this

objectivation that is characterised by *self-determination* is inseparable from cognition.

Also therefore *self-determination* as that unceasing process of objectivation of that which is subjective within the internal structure of man, constitutes that entry into subjectivity. 'It follows to note that the term *self-determination* points at the same time to that the deciding (and acting) is itself only a subject i.e. the personal *I* as a subject determines its very self. Consequently in this dynamic relation the said *I* becomes the subject for its very self – the subject of will as the ruler of the deciding subject'<sup>10</sup>.

For an act, as a conscious action of man manifesting itself in experience, as opposed to that *which only happens within him*, has its roots in the will which finds its explanation in the freedom: *I want – I am not forced*. Therefore also an analysis of act, in its rich and complex reality, must reveal one of two fundamental points, namely the volitive dimension, to speak in a more precise way the dimension of freedom for the individual. For it is in this very point that the person is revealed in the least complete way, and it is this that constitutes the bases of *self-determination*. 'The discovery of freedom at the root of an individual's causativeness allows us all the more to fundamentally understand man as a *dynamic subject*' (Wojtyła 1985, 148).

The transcendence of a person displaying one's own freedom is both the motor as well as the source of his dynamism. This is first of all the dynamism which is played out internally within man, only later does it manifest itself as an act, through which it realises itself or not. Therefore equally this insane emphasis on *self-determination* as an essential category of person, within which there has to be fulfilled the deepest of his existential fate, is especially needed by the person himself.

### References:

- Boros, L. (1962). *Mysterium mortis: Der Mensch in der letzten entscheidung*. Olten: Valter-Verlag.  
 Boros, L. (1974). *Mysterium Mortis (Polish translation of Man in the Face of the Final Decision)*, Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.  
 Krąpiec, M. A. (ed) (1995). *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozoficzna*. Lublin: SITA.

---

<sup>10</sup> K. Wojtyła (2000). *Trascendencia osoby w czynie a autoteologia człowieka*, in: K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn (oraz inne studia antropologiczne)*. Lublin: Academic Society of Lublin Catholic University, p. 484.



- Moller, A. C., Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2006). *Choice and ego-depletion: The moderating role of autonomy*. „Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin”, 32, 1024-1036.
- Ryan, R. M., Rigby, C. S., & Przybylski, A. K. (2006). *Motivational pull of video games: A self-determination theory approach*. „Motivation and Emotion”, 30, 347-365.
- Styczeń, T. (1980). *Doświadczenie człowieka i świadczenie człowiekowi*. „Znak” 3, 263-275.
- Wojtyła, K. (1969). *Osoba i czyn* (the Polish first edition). Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne.
- Wojtyła, K. (1974). *The structures of Self-Determination as the core of the theory of the person*, „Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario. Atti del Congresso Internazionale”, vol.7, Roma – Napoli.
- Wojtyła, K. (1976). *Act and Experience*, in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Analecta Husseriana*, V. Dordrecht: D.Reidel.
- Wojtyła, K. (1979). *The Acting Person*. (English translation edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka and A. Potocki). Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Wojtyła, K. (1981). *Person und Tat*. (German translation). Freiburg: Herder.
- Wojtyła, K. (1982). *Persona e atto*. (Italian translation). Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Wojtyła, K. (1982). *Persona y accion*. (Spanish translation). Madrid: La Editorial Catolica.
- Wojtyła, K. (1983). *Personne et acte*. (French translation). Paris: Le Centurion.
- Wojtyła, K. (1985). *Osoba i czyn* (the second Polish edition amended and supplemented). Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne.
- Wojtyła, K. (2000). *Osoba i czyn (oraz inne studia antropologiczne)*, (the third Polish edition). Lublin: Academic Society of Lublin Catholic University.
- Wojtyła, K. (2000). *Trascendenza osoby w czynie a autoteologia człowieka*, in: K.Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn (oraz inne studia antropologiczne)*. Lublin: Academic Society of Lublin Catholic University.
- Wojtyła, K. (2003), *Metafisica della persona (tutte le opere e saggi integrativi)*, a cura di Giovanni Reale e Tadeusz Styczeń. Milano: Bompiani, 2nd ed.